

# Depression

DEPRESSION is sadly a common feature of modern life and affects many people. Because it is an invisible illness, we often will not know who is suffering with it. If we suffer ourselves, it can be very hard to deal with. As we wrote in the first of this series, taking the Bible view on such issues does not mean we should not accept whatever help is available.

A very helpful model used to approach depression from a psychological point of view is the 'cognitive triad'. This is when



a person holds excessively negative views about themselves, the world or the future (or all three). Interestingly, the scriptures have much to say about this triad of topics and provide us with extremely powerful perspectives to help us when we are feeling spiritually depressed.

## 1. About Ourselves

A common reason why we might have a negative view about ourselves is because we feel guilty about how we behave, perhaps how often we disobey God. It can feel overwhelming when we have not been able to conquer a particular temptation or we are struggling with the same sinful behaviour for many years.

At other times we may be feeling down about our efforts to do the right thing, with thoughts such as: "I've hardly done anything for God. I'm just not good enough." If not kept in check, these thoughts and feelings can send us into a state of spiritual despair and depression.

It then becomes even more difficult to fight against sin and to do what God asks. Needless to say, the effects on our faith can be disastrous. What can be done to break this destructive cycle of self-criticism?

When we feel spiritually depressed about ourselves it is likely that we are placing far too much emphasis on us and far too

little emphasis on God and the Lord Jesus Christ. Personally speaking, there are times when I have been so concerned with my own sins and so wrapped up in my efforts to do good works that I have managed to make discipleship all about me!

However, the plain teaching of the Bible is that of ourselves we cannot be righteous (morally good) before God. The first seven chapters of the letter to the Romans give a thorough explanation of this crucial theme. Rather, it is through faith in Christ that a man or woman is 'justified' (looked upon as righteous) in the eyes of God:

*All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus (Romans 3:23–24).*

It is true that essential aspects of having faith in Christ are resisting temptation (Luke 22:40) and practising good works (Ephesians 2:10). However, these are to be done with God and Christ at the forefront of our minds, acknowledging that no matter how successfully we resist temptation or how many good works we manage to do, we can never be pronounced righteous in the eyes of God without faith.

Jesus Christ lived a perfect life of holiness and good works, and defeated sin. We share in that victory by having faith in him. This change in perspective enables us to cease being depressed about our own inadequacies and instead be glad that by God's grace we are looked upon as righteous because of our faith in His Son.

This doesn't mean that we don't try to do the right things – we still need to do our best!

## 2. About the World

There are plenty of reasons to feel depressed about the world. If we watch the news, we may find ourselves groaning in despair at just how wicked the world really is. There is nothing we can do to change that state of affairs – the world will not experience any significant changes for the better until the Lord Jesus returns.

What we can do to make us feel better is remind ourselves that the wicked state of the world is consistent with what the Bible teaches:

*Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world — the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life — is not of the Father but is of the world. And the world is passing away, and the lust of it; but he who does the will of God abides forever (1 John 2:15–17).*

When we see that what the Bible teaches corresponds to what we experience in our lives it can encourage us. It can also act as a powerful reminder of why we should want to be in the Kingdom of God.

The world we see now is only one side of the story. To get the whole picture we must keep in mind what Jesus taught about his own life's mission in relation to the world. This is a key theme in the Gospel of John. Frequently in this Gospel the world being

spoken of is what we might describe as ‘the Jewish world’, i.e. the nation of Israel during the time of Jesus (see 7:4, 18:20 etc.) and not ‘the world’ as we might use the term today. However, as the Jewish world of the first century was a microcosm of the wider world, the following teaching of Jesus still has relevance for us and our ‘world’ today.

Speaking to his disciples, Jesus said:

*The world cannot hate you, but it hates me because I testify of it that its works are evil (John 7:7).*

Jesus knows how it feels to live in a wicked world. How did he encourage his disciples in their unavoidable struggles with the world?

*These things I have spoken to you, that in me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world (John 16:33).*

With this instruction Jesus invited his disciples to change their focus from the problems which the world would cause, and concentrate on him and the fact that he is the solution to their problems. This inspiring theme is expanded on in the first letter of John:

*For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world — our faith. Who is he who overcomes the world, but he who believes that Jesus is the Son of God? (1 John 5:4–5).*

Faith in Jesus as the Son of God accomplishes so much because of what Jesus did in overcoming the world by the

sacrifice of himself. When we feel depressed about the world, let us remember that Jesus has overcome it and that we too can overcome the world by our faith in him.

### 3. About the Future

No-one knows exactly what the future holds for us in our individual lives. Some may find this fact liberating and maybe even exciting.

Others use this as an opportunity to ‘catastrophize’ about what the future may hold for them. They might fear that in the future it will be even harder to be a disciple of Jesus than it is now; or that in the future they might be persecuted for their faith; or they might wonder how they would cope if their spouse were to die before them.

These melancholic musings carry enough weight to significantly damage our spiritual or mental health.

What guidance from the Bible do we have to help us face the future with hope and optimism instead of dread and pessimism?

The Apostle Paul had the benefit of the Holy Spirit which enabled him to know certain aspects of his future. However, the details were hidden from him and so, like us, he lived in uncertainty about exactly what the future would hold for him. This is what he said, as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles:

*And see, now I go bound in the spirit to Jerusalem, not knowing the things that will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit*

*testifies in every city, saying that chains and tribulations await me (Acts 20:22–23).*

Paul knew from the start of his ministry that he would experience great suffering as a disciple of Jesus (see Acts 9:16). However, when he was going to Jerusalem, he did not know the details about what was going to happen to him there. In a similar way, we do not know the details about what we might have to go through. Instead of being distracted by wanting to know the future, we can increase our focus on what is really important and concentrate on establishing a right relationship with God.

This is what Paul did, as we shall now see. He continued:

*But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God (Acts 20:24).*

Paul's focus was not on the temporary things of this life; rather he followed Jesus' instruction:

*Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal; but lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also (Matthew 6:19–21).*

Paul focused his mind on the hugely important task that Jesus had given him to do, which was to preach the Gospel. He could have worried about the certainty



of future suffering or the uncertain details concerning this, but instead he took strength from concentrating on the task he had been given – ‘to testify to the gospel of the grace of God’.

If we find ourselves experiencing a bout of depression regarding the future, we can look to examples such as Paul and be reminded to focus on the bigger picture. God has provided a wonderful hope for the future in His Kingdom. And He has given us things to do now.

This is so much more important than any dire deliberation which we can devise concerning the future.

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